

***Empire Dreams***, by Wendy Wax, is the story of the building of the Empire State Building as seen through the eyes of eleven-year-old Julie Singer. Julie has been keeping a scrap book of newspaper clippings, which tell about the building of the tallest skyscraper in the world. However, Julie doesn't learn one of the most interesting facts about the building until a boy gives her an Indian bracelet found at the construction site. Then she learns about the Skywalkers—Indian workers who can walk along high beams as if they are walking on the ground. She is intrigued enough to sneak into Manhattan to see them; however on the way, she spies her father, a successful architect, in a park with a group of unemployed men. She realizes he has no work but that he leaves the house each morning so as not to worry his family. Wanting to help, Julie asks her aunt and uncle, who own a collar factory in Manhattan, for piecework. She does her sewing in a park near the Empire State Building and meets Daniel, a young Mohawk "Skywalker," who gives her first-hand information about working on the construction site. Shortly after meeting Daniel, she learns that his brother has had a serious fall from one of the high beams. Despite serious injuries, he survives. And Julie and her family, while needing to cut back on all but the basics, manage to find a way to live through the economic crisis soon to be known as the Great Depression.

### PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading ***Empire Dreams***, discuss with your class what they already know about the Empire State Building and the Great Depression. After sharing responses, read the title and tell them that the story takes place in 1930 at the beginning of the Depression when the Empire State Building was under construction. Some questions for discussion might be:

- If this story took place in 1930, what else was happening in America/New York around the same time? Where does it fit in chronologically with other events of American history/New York City history already studied? Who was president/mayor? What other famous buildings were already built/not yet built?
- Look at the cover illustration. What do students notice in the picture? What might "Empire Dreams" refer to in this story?
- Look at the map at the beginning of the book. Have students find the Empire State Building and other landmarks that are noted.
- How many students have been to the top of the Empire State Building? What do they remember most about their visit?

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

#### Literature • Social Studies • Art • Writing

1. After reading all or part of the book, discuss historical fiction as a type of literature, a mixture of fact and fiction. Some of the people mentioned in the story actually existed

and many of the events really occurred. Even those characters that are created by the author probably shared some of the experiences and feelings of real people. Discuss how the reader can distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction. Groups of students might try researching events and people mentioned in the story using sources such as encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, historical documents, newspapers, etc. Have a mini-lesson about how to use these sources and a class "debriefing." What names and events could they read about in other sources? Which were most likely created by the author?

2. This story exposes children to what life was like for one young girl and boy living in New York City in the 1930s, but there is much more to learn about the Empire State Building and the Great Depression. Encourage them to dig a little deeper into the past to discover more information:

- This story took place in 1930, less than one year after the Stock Market Crash. What else can you learn about the Crash and the Great Depression that followed? Consult a variety of sources, including books, old newspapers and magazines.
- Daniel, the young Skywalker in the story, returns to his home on a Reservation once a month. What can you learn about Native American Reservations past and present? When and why were they developed? How many Native Americans live on Reservations now?
- The Empire State Building is one of the most famous buildings in America. Read more about it in other books, including those listed in the bibliography on page 91.

3 "Oy vay iz mir," and "Oy gevalt!" are just two of the many Yiddish expressions Julie's grandma uses throughout the story. Get a Yiddish dictionary and learn what these and other Yiddish expressions mean. Ask your students to share funny expressions that their parents and grandparents say to them, in English and/or other languages. Children can also ask their parents if they remember expressions their parents and grandparents used to say over and over. Make a class book or poster, with translations, and when appropriate, use these expressions in class!

4. Explore several different maps of New York City. Students have already looked at the abbreviated map of Manhattan and Brooklyn at the beginning of the book. If possible, get a variety of other maps of New York City, including subway maps and street maps for students to navigate. On pages 70-71, Julie takes a long walk through Manhattan, boards a train on Canal Street and mistakenly goes over the Manhattan Bridge to Gowanus instead of over the Williamsburg Bridge to Williamsburg. Have students trace her walk with a highlighter marker on a street map, and using the subway map name the modern-day subway lines Julie would have used. How many miles did Julie walk? How long was her train ride to Gowanus?/Williamsburg?

# TEACHER'S GUIDE

## EMPIRE DREAMS

5. On pages 6-7, the Singers share a traditional Sabbath dinner. Ask students to describe special meals their families celebrate together. Students may enjoy having a mini cultural food festival, where students bring in a dish to share with their classmates. Students could turn their desks into “booths” with samples of their dish, photographs from family celebrations, candleholders or napkins they use, copies of recipes, etc.

6. On page 53, Daniel says “I’ll do it (be an ironworker) whether I like it or not. It’s more than a family tradition. It’s the only way I can prove my manhood.” Talk with your students about pressures they feel from family, siblings and/or friends to do certain things or act certain ways. It might be easier for students to talk about their feelings in small groups. Within these small groups, have students make up skits where a child is being pressured to do something. Instead of having the group act out an ending, stop and have a whole class discussion about different choices the child has. If you have time, groups might try acting out several different endings to their skits.

7. The bracelet Julie wears throughout the story is one of Mohawk design. Set up a jewelry making center in your classroom with your students’ help. Collect books on jewelry making and Native American jewelry and design. Purchase inexpensive beads, string and clasps from an art or toy store. With inspiration from Native American designs, be creative and have fun!

### STORY EXTENSIONS

#### **Build Models of the Empire State Building!**

The many descriptions of the actual construction of the Empire State Building throughout the story will no doubt fascinate your students. Encourage them to read more about the building and study photographs and pictures in the books listed in the bibliography on page 91. If possible invite an architect and/or engineer to talk to your class about designing and building a new building. If they know interesting information about the Empire State Building, encourage them to share it with your students.

As a class, brainstorm a list of materials that could be used to make a model of the Empire State Building: blocks, cardboard, clay, Lego—no doubt your students will have many more creative ideas. List important features about the Empire State Building that students should keep in mind including its height, number of stories, etc. Discuss how to build a model in accurate proportion (i.e. 1 block = 10 stories). Acting as the roaming mathematical and engineering consultant, send students off in pairs or small groups to build their models. Invite other classrooms in to admire the construction and finished products.



by Wendy Wax

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